

JULY 9, 1981

Wet weather kicked off an insect explosion in the Shortgrass Country. Normally our climate only supports drouth resistant strains of flies and killer ticks that can in emergencies live from dry blood. But this year after over 15 inches of rain, big swarms of stinging and buzzing varmints have moved in to disturb the populace. Big leaders in the invasion have been the mosquitoes and grasshoppers.

Two of my close friends sell insecticides. On any visit to San Angelo, I am entertained by stories of the fire ants' migration westward, or for a livestock thriller, the proliferation of the new medicine resistant stomach worms.

Instead of expanding their marketing areas, they simply enlarge on last year's tales of bees that carry off Japanese gardeners without leaving a trace of their kimonos, or Mexican beetles that undermine the economy of whole communities. At nights I don't have to seek the excitement of Hollywood's fantasy on T.V. I was prepared for the movie "Jaws" way before kids started having nightmares from visiting aquariums.

In spite of all this prepared drama, I still seek their advice for bug and parasite control. My gardening efforts have been reduced to raising dwarf tomato vines and few plants of non-bearing mini-squash; nevertheless, I continue to dust and spray around the house as if a big crop was in prospect. Just like everybody else in Mertzon, I seem to be bound to spend a few hundred dollars a summer for the right to remember the bumper crops of other years.

My latest folly has been to fight the grasshoppers that are stripping my grapevines. Grasshoppers have free reign at my house in town. We don't have any boys at home any more to harness the big ones to matchsticks, or shoot the others with B.B. guns. Child Who Sits in the Sun mashes a few as part of her war potion, but I can't depend on her because she'll stop chasing grasshoppers to copy bird calls and wander off as bad as the boys used to do when they were on a hunt.

Give or take a few dollars, I have about \$1900 in those two vines, so I had to go to Angelo to load up on the latest grasshopper remedy.

I found one of my partners at his business. The other one I suspect was off at the library reading up on the biblical plagues. He was most sympathetic of my plight. According to him, unless this year's crop of grasshoppers was stopped, Texas was going to experience a famine that'd make the hunger pains of India sound like mere rumbles of a ground squirrel's stomach. He said that up north of my vineyard, farmers were losing their fences from grasshoppers weighing down the top wires. Sorrow played across his face as he recounted how combines were stopping up from the swarms of insects. Like all the sideline warriors I've ever observed, he nearly sobbed when he said "I don't know what we are going to do to stop them, but my company is sure going to do their part."

Next, he brought out the clincher. His suggestion was to spend a few days estimating how far a Mertzon grasshopper jumps. He claims that every region produces a different style jumper, ranging from a low hurdle hopper to a long distance reseau that's been known to clear ship channels when the boats were in dock. The essence of his plan was that once I had the norm for my area, he could provide chemical protection that

would hold the grasshoppers out of range. By figures, counting time and money, I could save the vines for \$6500.

Since I wasn't raising champagne grapes, I decided to leave the grasshopper alone. By August the country will be so dry and hot, no kind of pest will be able to jump or fly. Someday when you have time, just try to measure a grasshopper's jumping range and you'll understand why the Noelke vineyard fell to ruin.